DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 259 455 EA 017 915

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TITLE Student Discipline Policies. ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management: ERIC Digest, Number Twelve.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, Eugene, Oreg.
SPONS AGENCY National Inst. of Education (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE 84
CONTRACT 400-83-0013
NOTE 3p.
AVAILABLE FROM Publication Sales, ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, Center for Advanced Technology in Education, University of Oregon, 1787 Agate Street, Eugene, OR 97403 (free).
PUB TYPE Information Analyses - ERIC Information Analysis Products (071)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Corporal Punishment; Court Litigation; *Discipline; *Discipline Policy; Discipline Problems; Elementary Secondary Education; Expulsion; Legal Problems; Policy Formation; School Law; *School Policy; Student Behavior; *Student Rights; Student School Relationship; Suspension
IDENTIFIERS ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

Educational policy makers and administrators must choose from a bewildering variety of discipline models and techniques. Legal intervention and contradictory research findings further complicate the matter. There is, therefore, no cut-and-dried solution to student behavior problems. Rather, discipline policies must be based on community values, and on administrators' best judgment of students' welfare. Policy recommendations emerging from the literature include (1) the need for accurate data on student behavior prior to setting policy; (2) involvement in policy making by all groups affected by it (i.e. students, teachers, parents, and community members); (3) clear definition of undesirable student behavior; (4) flexibility, to allow for different situations; (5) clear communication via a readable and well-designed student handbook; and (6) consistent enforcement. (TE)

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STUDENT DISCIPLINE POLICIES

Educational policy-makers and administrators must choose from a bewildering variety of discipline models and techniques. Legal intervention and contradictory research findings further complicate the matter. There is, therefore, no cut-and-dried solution to student behavior problems. Rather, discipline policies must be based on community values and on their makers' best judgment of students' welfare.

What is the benefit of a discipline policy?

A school discipline policy can help prevent and control student behavior problems by coordinating the school's disciplinary procedures and by informing students what types of behavior are expected of them, and what forbidden. Also, by minimizing arbitrary punishment, a policy can improve both the school's climate and its defense against legal challenges.

Such a policy, however, has inherent limitations. On the one hand, many disruptions occur in the classroom and are inseparable from the student-teacher relationship. On the other, even the best policy is only a document, and how it is carried out is at least as important as what it says. According to a growing body of literature, the primary determinant of discipline policy effectiveness is a healthy relationship between school and student--as indicated by such variables as principals' leadership styles and students' perceptions of whether or not they are fairly treated (Ben Brodinsky, John deJung and others). Influences beyond the scope of discipline policy, like curriculum content, may be even more significant (Susan Kaeser, Daniel Duke and Vernon Jones, NSBA).

With the above limits in mind, we can define the basic functions of discipline policy. Ben Brodinsky, for example, states these functions as follows:

- Informing the reader of the school board's discipline philosophy. Publicizing the philosophy increases the chance that students will willingly comply with, that school personnel will uniformly enforce, and that parents will support the school's discipline procedures.

- Placing responsibility for policy enforcement. This step ensures that discipline will not be neglected through buck-passing and helps assure parents that the policy is indeed being enforced.

- Specifying offenses and fixing their seriousness. Defining and differentiating misbehavior promotes fair and consistent enforcement.

Should the policy emphasize punishment or prevention?

American schools have traditionally dealt with student misbehavior by checking it as it arose, usually through punishment. In recent years, however, suspension and corporal punishment, the two most common punitive methods, have increasingly come under fire. Corporal punishment, many believe, psychologically harms students and presents great potential for abuse if applied maliciously or in anger (J. John Harris and others). Suspension may discriminate against racial minorities, remove from school those students who most need to be in school, and actually reward some by giving them a "holiday." Both penalties are said to treat only symptoms of deeper problems, to divert time and energy from instruction, and, if seen by students as arbitrarily applied, to increase tension in schools (Ben Brodinsky, Kaeser, Henry Lufler, Shi-Chang Wu).

Common sense as well as some research argues powerfully for prevention. With fewer day-to-day discipline problems, schools would become more "productive" and educate happier, healthier individuals. Critics claim that preventive methods like incentive programs and counseling are costly and ineffective, whereas punishment at least reduces immediate disruptions (Ben Brodinsky, Edward Wynne). Inschool suspension, having both punitive and preventive aspects and often incorporating counseling, may be effective against some types of misbehavior, but it too is subject to many of the criticisms noted above.

There is currently no firm scientific basis for choosing one discipline method over another. Indeed, Edward Wynne argues that research will never adequately explain all that might be important in student discipline; recent studies (deJung and others, Duke and Jones, Wu) propose only tentative conclusions, emphasizing the great need for further research. For now, practical, moral, and legal considerations must guide educators' choices. Indeed, some believe that the law and particularly the Supreme Court virtually dictate school policy.

Have the courts handicapped school discipline?

In the late 1960s and early 1970s a number of court decisions limited schools' ability to punish students and prohibited them from restricting student activities protected by the First Amendment. Many educators see these decisions as impairing their ability to maintain appropriate discipline; the due process requirements established by Goss v. Lopez for student suspension are particularly controversial.

Although the law clearly affects the content

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of discipline policy and indeed has spurred school systems to create more explicit and comprehensive policies, the courts have intervened only reluctantly and have confined their decisions to clear violations of students' constitutional rights. Due process requirements are not stringent.

Should schools attempt to be fair to each student, or should they curtail the rights of the disruptive minority to maintain an orderly school environment for the majority? This question, which involves the fundamental values of our society, runs through both the theoretical and legal debates outlined above and is crucial to selecting disciplinary strategies. If it is true, as some claim, that we have made too much of individual rights, we should take care not to go too far to the opposite extreme.

What makes a discipline policy effective?

Each school, each student, and each situation is unique. There is no single solution to discipline problems. A few broad recommendations emerge from the literature, however.

- **Information.** Policies must be aimed at factual problems, not rumors. School districts should gather accurate data on student behavior in their schools before setting policy.

- **Involvement.** All groups affected by a policy should be involved in creating it--in this case the students who must conform to the policy, the school personnel who must enforce it, and ideally students' families and other community members.

- **Problem definition.** Policy-makers cannot assume that everyone agrees on what constitutes undesirable student behavior. Defining the problem is the first step toward solving it.

- **Flexibility.** Rather than relying on a rigid system of penalties, policy should allow for different situations and prescribe different methods for different problems.

- **Communication.** All students, parents, and school personnel should be aware of the school's discipline policy or student conduct code. A readable and well-designed student handbook is a widely used tool for informing students.

- **Consistent enforcement.** If students are to cooperate with a discipline code, they must believe they will be treated fairly.

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ERIC DIGEST, Number Twelve

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This publication was prepared with funding from the National Institute of Education, U.S. Department of Education under contract no. 400-83-0013. The opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of NIE or the Department of Education.

A product of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management
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1984